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Walden scores major victory with healthy forests initiative

Shortly after Rep. Greg Walden unveiled his sweeping forest health bill in the U.S. House of Representatives earlier this spring it was ridiculed by another member of the Oregon congressional delegation.

"It won't pass the laugh test," scoffed Rep. Peter DeFazio of Eugene, who said the bill would gut the National Environmental Policy Act and pave the way for 1,000-acre clear cuts in Oregon's old-growth forests.

We wonder who is laughing now that the bill, known as the Health Forests Restoration Act (HR 1904), passed unanimously Thursday in a vote of the 50-member House Agriculture Committee. The bill is now headed to a vote by the full House as early as Memorial Day, where Washington insiders are predicting it will do more than pass the laugh test.

Apparently Walden was able to demonstrate to the satisfaction of his colleagues that the bill does not provide for clear cuts. What it does do is exempt 1,000-acre plots from the usual protracted planning process to accommodate timely research into insect epidemics. It was unfair and disingenuous of DeFazio to suggest otherwise.

If passed, the Walden-McInnis bill will expedite the ability of forest managers to treat 20 million acres of land in the rural-urban interface of the American West that has been identified as particularly at risk to wildfires, insects and disease. The bill also proposes to streamline the federal appeals process so that projects can no longer be tied up by environmental groups in endless appeals.

That is good news for rural communities in Oregon and around the West who are facing the threat of catastrophic forests fires. Last summer more than seven million acres of forest burned, leaving behind damaged rivers, streams and lakes and releasing tons of dangerous pollu-

tants into the air. Twenty-three firefighters — including a van load of young men and women from eastern Oregon — lost their lives in an attempt to suppress those fires.

The unanimous endorsement of the bill in the House Agriculture Committee is a major political victory for Walden, who has faced an uphill battle convincing his colleagues, including many in his own party, that some thinning is needed to improve the health of the nation's forest. His campaign got a big boost last summer when President Bush came to Oregon to see firsthand the devastation of the 500,000-acre Biscuit Fire and, later, in his state of the union address mentioned forest health as one of his top priorities.

If Walden is successful in steering his healthy forests initiative all the way through Congress, he will have achieved nothing short of a political miracle, representing a major paradigm shift in the way the nation and its leaders view conservation and environmental stewardship. Hands-off preservation will have given way to hands-on management and, yes, even some responsible logging.

For many people close to the forest health problem in the West, 20 million acres of rural/urban interface specified in the Walden-McInnis bill falls short of treating all of the forests that are in need of fuels reduction. The Department of Interior estimates that approximately 190 million acres of federal land are at unnatural risk of catastrophic wildfire.

It is good politics to protect timbered areas that are close to homes in the way that Walden has proposed but it would be even better to also protect the rest of the forest as well. For now, the Walden-McInnis bill represents a good compromise between the political realities of Washington and the environmental needs of the people back home in Oregon.